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Viewing cable 09MANAGUA837, NICARAGUAN OPPOSITION UNITY EFFORTS: A PROMISING

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- The top box shows each cables unique reference number, when and by whom it originally was sent, and what its initial classification was.
- The middle box contains the header information that is associated with the cable. It includes information about the receiver(s) as well as a general subject.
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Reference ID	Created	Released	Classification	Origin
09MANAGUA837	2009-08-25 21:31	2011-08-30 01:44	CONFIDENTIAL	Embassy Managua

Appears in these articles:

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SUBJECT: NICARAGUAN OPPOSITION UNITY EFFORTS: A PROMISING
START BUT WILL ALEMAN PLAY?

Classified By: Ambassador Robert Callahan, Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

¶1. (C) Summary. For the first time in nearly a year, serious efforts are underway to foster opposition unity ahead of Nicaragua's 2011 national elections. The goal of these efforts is to encourage the Constitutional Liberal Party (PLC), led by ex-President Arnoldo Aleman, and the Independent Liberal Party (PLI), led by 2006 presidential candidate Eduardo Montealegre, to unite via a step-by-step process that includes opposing constitutional reform and forming a new Supreme Electoral Council, with the ultimate goal of forming an alliance with other smaller parties to present one common slate for the 2011 elections. Both parties have participated in the initial stages of these efforts, but confidence on both sides is low and significant hurdles remain. Ultimately, unity will require meaningful concessions on the part of Aleman and breaking of his current "pacto" with President Daniel Ortega, two elements he has resisted so far. End Summary.

FORCES DIVIDED

¶2. (C) Following the November 2008 municipal elections, Nicaragua's opposition remains divided between Aleman's PLC, which holds 22 votes in the National Assembly, as well as half the magistrates on the Supreme Court and CSE, and Eduardo Montealegre's forces, now under the PLI banner, with 16 National Assembly deputies. Recent polling continues to show that Montealegre is viewed as the "leader of the opposition" and holds the highest favorable ratings of any prominent opposition leader, even among the PLC. Aleman remains less popular than even Ortega and is increasingly unpopular even within his own party, despite a nation-wide effort to rehabilitate his public image, including a weekly television show and radio show and the opening of a charitable foundation in his name. The left-of-center Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS) remains in third place among the opposition, with its support concentrated in the Pacific coast and larger urban areas. A plurality of the electorate increasingly identifies itself as "independent" though anti-Sandinista. A successful coalition, especially the presidential candidate, will need to be able to motivate these independent voters to participate in an election process that they increasingly view as corrupt and ineffective.

STEPS TO UNITY

¶3. (C) One effort to unify the opposition is led by the "Reflection Group," headed by Antonio Lacayo, Minister of the Presidency under Violetta Chamorro (his mother-in-law) and

Roger Arteaga, president of the American Chamber of Commerce (AMCHAM). The group also includes prominent businessmen, media figures, and former politicians. The Group recognizes the lack of confidence between the main parties, especially between Aleman and Montealegre personally, and envisions a long-term process to foster unity through dialogue and a series of step-by-step actions. To try to unify forces now, they believe, would be impossible and any formal union could not be sustained in the current political environment. To start the parties on this process, the group has held a series of meetings with the leaders of the three main parties, to be followed by joint meetings of the three groups together, with each side represented by five members each.

14. (C) The Reflection Group envisions a three-step process to form a unified opposition by mid-2010. Between now and December, they believe the opposition must focus solely on opposing constitutional reforms, which would permit President Ortega to run for re-election, among other changes. On this issue, there is at least rhetorical consensus among the PLC, PLI and MRS. If they succeed in blocking reform, Ortega will be dealt a significant political blow and he will be forced to deal with internal party struggles in the race to control succession within the FSLN party. Further, the process of blocking reform will establish the confidence necessary to advance unity in more practical terms.

15. (C) Beginning in January 2010, the opposition would next focus on filling more than 30 upcoming vacancies in key government offices, including the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE), the Supreme Court (CSJ), the Comptroller's Office, and

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the Prosecutor's Office. Through the "pacto," Aleman and Ortega have split these positions in order to maintain their control over the country. Breaking the "pacto's" hold on these positions, particularly filling the CSE with independent or respected individuals, is key to establishing a more democratic electoral environment and to restoring public confidence in governmental institutions, especially the CSE. The leaders of the Reflection Group acknowledge that this will be the most difficult hurdle, as Aleman continues to view these positions as critical to his power and political (and legal) protection. But without new individuals, in whom the leaders of the PLI, MRS, and civil society have confidence, unity will not be possible. Finally, should an accommodation be reached on filling by consensus the public positions, the Reflection Group believes it will be an easier process to negotiate the joint opposition ticket, determine the division of seats for each group/party in the National Assembly and Cabinet, and put together a formal unity ticket.

UNITY AMONG THE LIBERALS

16. (C) Concurrent with the Reflection Group's efforts, Abelardo Mata, Bishop of Esteli, has initiated an effort focused solely on uniting the Liberals, mainly the PLC and PLI. Mata is enormously popular among Liberals and anti-Sandinista activists and has been one of the leading figures in denouncing Ortega's anti-democratic actions. Like the Reflection Group, he believes there is too much animosity and too little confidence between the two parties to permit unity at this time and advocates a gradual process of encouraging the Liberal forces to work together on practical issues in order to pave the way for a broader unity effort.

17. (C) In the first meeting he convoked between Aleman and Montealegre, he urged both sides to end their public criticisms of each other. Second, he urged the two parties to work on a common legislative agenda and establish a working group to coordinate joint actions in the National Assembly. In particular, he urged the PLC to formally endorse a resolution submitted by Montealegre's deputies

calling for the expulsion of Honduran President Mel Zelaya from Nicaragua. All sides agreed on the threat posed by Zelaya and the instability he had caused in the north of Nicaragua and therefore the two parties together could push the non-binding resolution through the Assembly. Once the two parties begin working together in the Assembly, the group would be expanded to include the Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance (ALN), formerly led by Montealegre, which holds two seats on the Assembly's Executive Committee and represents 6 key votes.

¶8. (C) In Mata's view, a regular dialogue between Aleman and Montealegre, matched with coordinated joint efforts between the two parties, should pave the way for the two sides to deal with the more complex issues of making changes to the CSE, including others in the coalition, and forming a joint ticket. Mata is clear that Aleman cannot be the candidate, but believes only a negotiated process can convince him to join the opposition, reject the "pacto" with Ortega, and endorse another candidate. "If we fail to unite all the democratic forces," he warned, "Nicaragua is finished."

WILL THE PLC PLAY?

¶9. (C) It is not clear that Aleman and the PLC leadership are prepared to seriously engage in these efforts. They have met several times with the Reflection Group, put forward representatives for the next round of joint meetings (all Aleman hard-liners), and participated in one meeting called by Bishop Mata. However, Aleman failed to show for Mata's second round on August 18, with his close associates first claiming that former 2006 PLC presidential candidate Jose Rizo was out of town, and then later "confidentially" asserting that Aleman was too drunk to attend. Tellingly, the PLC has demurred on agreeing to another date for the next round of Mata's meetings.

¶10. (C) Aleman confidant and PLC National Assembly Deputy Jose Pallais told us that Aleman has no choice but to attend the meetings with Mata, as Mata is too popular with the PLC

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base. Pallais acknowledged that the party base remains unhappy with Aleman's continued cooperation with Ortega and that the opposition would face serious difficulties with Aleman at the top of the ticket in 2011. Nonetheless, according to Pallais, Aleman feels confident at the moment that his image campaign is working, noting that party member registration is up significantly. He also admitted that Aleman generated Montealegre's ongoing problems within the PLI, hinting that Aleman was behind the CSE's warnings that the PLI could face de-registration.

¶11. (C) Pallais told us that Montealegre has only two options with regard to Liberal unity and the filling of the public positions. For Aleman, these public positions are "non-negotiable" and are key to his political power and protection. "We are a political party that wants to win and holding these seats is part of winning," he said. The PLC, therefore, will not permit the MRS or civil society to name their candidates to these positions. Pallais warned that Montealegre can agree to a formal unity with the PLC prior to March 2010, otherwise the PLC will negotiate the filling of the public positions with the FSLN and Montealegre will be forced to negotiate terms for unity afterwards from a position of weakness. If he agrees to formal unity prior to March 2010, Montealegre can select PLC members in whom he has confidence to be included in the lists for the public positions. Pallais further cautioned that Montealegre will not be able to launch his own presidential campaign under the PLI banner should efforts to form a unified Liberal party fail.

¶12. (C) The efforts by Mata and the Reflection Group represent the first serious and potentially viable efforts to start a process that can unite the disparate opposition forces ahead of the 2011 national elections. These efforts recognize that the struggle for unity has already begun through the debate on presidential elections, on which a vote must be scheduled in the National Assembly before the end of the year. Similarly, they recognize the confidence deficit and that success will be gradual and built upon a series of concrete actions, not merely words or a last-minute backroom deal.

¶13. (C) Unfortunately for the opposition, and the Nicaraguan public, the key to the success of these efforts is in Aleman's hands. He holds the votes to join the FSLN in passing constitutional reform, and deregistering competing opposition parties, or to break with the "pacto" and form an effective opposition coalition. It appears that he is playing both sides at the moment, on one hand participating, even personally, in the opposition dialogue, while on the other continuing to negotiate behind closed doors with the FSLN to engineer the destruction of his opponents. Pallais' comments indicate that Aleman continues to view Montealegre as his greatest threat, not Ortega. Moreover, it appears that Aleman remains convinced that he can defeat Ortega in 2011 if only he can absorb the other elements of the opposition into his party, on his terms of course.

¶14. (C) Our policy should remain to make clear that the USG will not get involved in the selection of a candidate nor directly facilitate the unity process. At the same time, we will continue to encourage all pro-democratic groups to work together to advance their common goals, including uniting for ¶2011. It is clear that this message has been understood by some in the political and business community, fostering the above unity efforts. We believe this posture will help compel the Nicaraguan opposition to resolve this problem on their own and create a durable broad-based movement in which our democracy and political assistance can have a greater impact.

CALLAHAN